

Language, power, and meaning – on discourses and discourse analysis

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Discourse Theory: What is a Discourse?

a specific way of perceiving, talking about and understanding the world (or parts of it), based on certain assumptions, governed and reproduced by exclusion and inclusion (power).

Discourse Theory

A discourse reflects a social practice connected to the use of language, patterns of action, habits and conventions – more or less governed by rules.

Within a discourse, there is a certain way to speak, write, act, **exclude, include, allow and forbid** – ways of **exerting power** in relation to others within and without the discourse.

Discourse Theory

As we, according to discourse theorists, view the world through the discursive mist, the interesting question to pose is not **what *is* true**, but **what *qualifies as* true**. What is true becomes a non-issue, and for some theorists even a questionable category... Instead, the perspective bound in life is what becomes interesting.

Discourses thus build worlds, or rather various versions of worlds.

Discourse Theory

These versions of the worlds becomes accessible as discourses, circulating and becoming **agreements** within a given context; **social realities**.

Discourses tend to work through constructing **their own perspective as natural and inevitable**.

The intellectual heritage of discourse theory

- post-structuralism
- critical theory
- marxism
- social constructivism

- **post-structuralism:** rejects the absolute truth – there is no meaning in the structure, big social science explanations of history are of no use; deconstruction as method; Foucault a discourse theorist and a poststructuralist
- **critical theory:** critically questioning the social reality; social relationships are historically created and the researcher has an important role of making people realize this and contributing to social change

- **marxism:** as social science theory: stressing power structures – focuses differences between groups (capital and labour, but now only that); exploitation and dominance as natural relationships between groups
- **social constructivism:** there is no independent reality; all knowledge is socially constructed; we think through a discursive mist and it is not possible to separate language and essence/reality

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis can be used to study **how ideas are created in texts and contexts**. A 'text' can be a book, an add, a newspaper or journal article, a conversation etc. The context is institutions, organisations and all other surroundings in which we live our lives.

Discourse Analysis

We as individuals ourselves (as citizens in various roles) produce ideas in relation to the narratives and representations that characterize our society.

The discourse analysis **studies this production and reproduction and its terms, in relation to power relations in society.**

Discourse Analysis

In the discourse analysis, language is at the centre. **Language forms relativity** (language does not reflect reality; ideas are not mere mirrors of material circumstances).

The discursive perspective thus does not separate idea and relativity. **Ideas about something, are not possible to separate from the essence of that something.**

Discourse Analysis

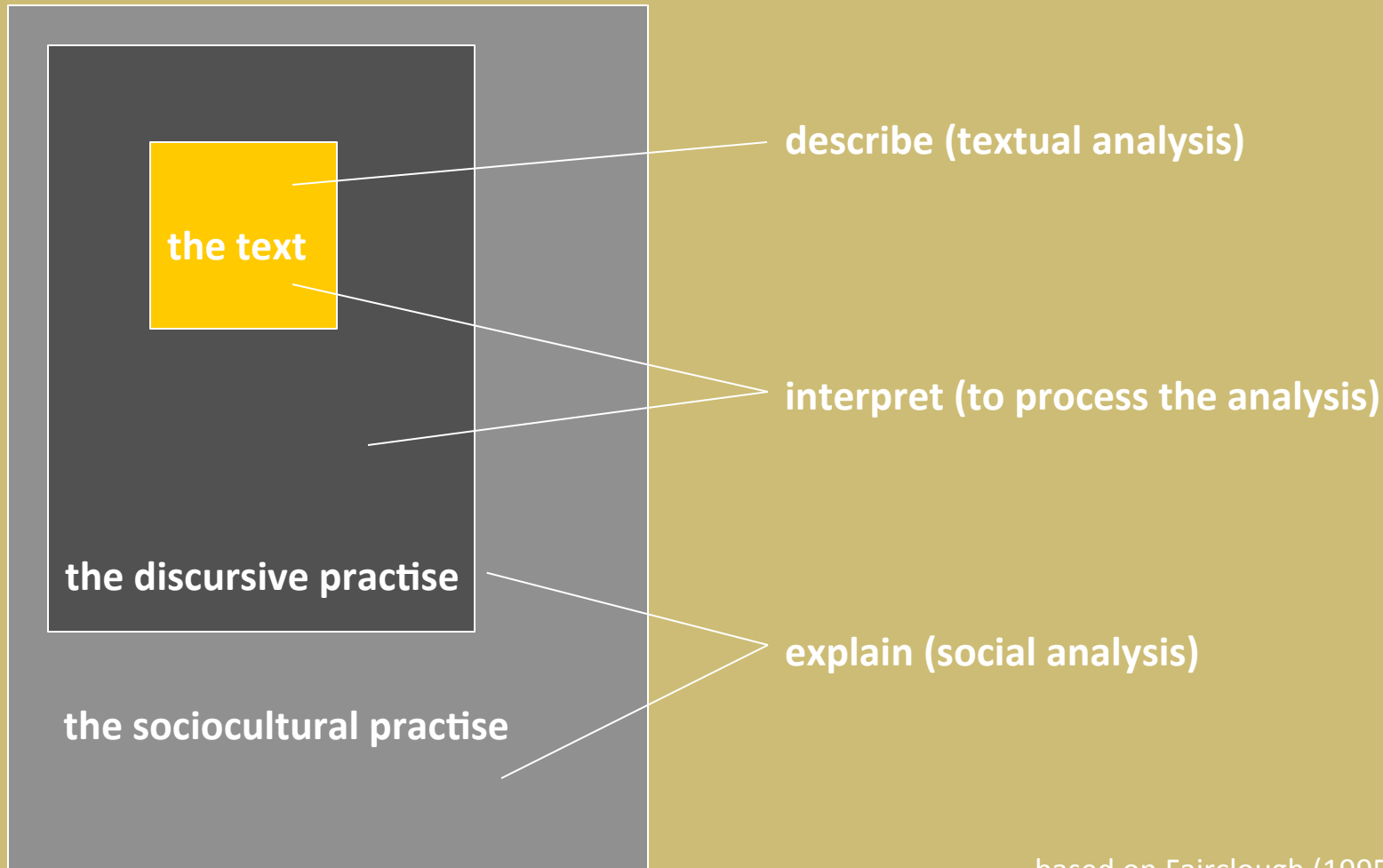
“To study boundaries and stories beyond what is true and right [...] Analysis of social categories – and connected identities – is a way of making clear the thought of discourses’ ways of defining what is possible. [---] The point is [...] that our worldviews and identities *could have been* different – through other ways of defining limits, and other characteristics. This means a non-essentialist stance as a researcher.”

Discourse Analysis in Practice (2007)

Discourse and Discourse Analysis

DIMENSIONS OF THE DISCOURSE

DIMENSIONS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS



based on Fairclough (1995)

Discourse Analysis

can be to analyze:

- basic entities
- assumptions of natural relationships
- actors and their motives (in two ways)
- key metaphores and rhetoric

Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth* (1997)

basic entities

The **ontology** of the discourse, that is, the perception of reality, the worldview of the discourse.

for example:

- the nature of the economic system (subsystem or autonomous)
- the nature of human beings (insatiable, utility maximizing, egocentric, altruistic etc.)

natural relationships

Assumptions of relations between the basic entities of the discourse.

for example:

- cooperation or competition (between humans)
- co-evolution or dominance (man-nature)

actors and their motives

Assumptions of what actors are important for development/change, and of how they function (the ontology of actors).

And: extend the analysis to the actors who reproduce the discourse.

key metaphores and rhetoric

Central metaphores and concepts within the discourse, with certain connotations and meaning, that often are used to convince.

for example:

- limits
- growth
- trade
- comparative advantages